

Golfers 1, skaters 0 - Birdies over boards

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A golf course, not a skate park, will be built near Five Points in Bristol Township.

BY JENNA PORTNOY

COURIER TIMES

Given a choice - Tony Hawk or Tiger Woods - teens in Bristol Township are all about the skateboarding legend.

Yet despite calls for a skate park from a vocal parents group and one county commissioner, Bucks County is moving forward with plans for a three-hole golf course and driving range in the township.

A nonprofit organization, The First Tee, would run golf programs for young people on the mini-course at Five Points near the Lower Bucks Government Services Center. Golfers of all ages could pay to use the driving range.

"It's designed to teach young people from lower income areas how to play golf, and some things that go along with that such as life skills," said Commissioner Charley Martin, who called skateboarding "something of a fad," like street hockey was when his kids were young. "Learning to play golf is something one can do almost at any stage of life."

But Commissioner Diane Marseglia said the \$400,000 the county set aside for the project would be better spent on a skate park that parents and their children have worked to bring to the township for a year. The Lower Bucks County Skate Board, which is applying for nonprofit status, garnered about 3,700 signatures on a petition calling for a park where young people could skate and bike legally and safely.

"Does the public really want to have nearly a half-million dollars spent on a three-hole golf course in a community that has been begging for a skate park?" Marseglia said.

Township resident Sharon Kosinski says "no." She often drives two of her children and their friends 30 minutes to an indoor skate park in Franklin Mills - it's either that or pay tickets upwards of \$350 for trespassing, she said.

"If the big interest of a large group of teens is a skate park, why would you offer them golf?" she said. "If they do anything with a golf club, they're going to peg each other with it. They're not trying to be Tiger Woods."

Another resident, 16-year-old Herman McCracken, said he and his friends often go to Trenton - as they did a few days ago - in search of places to skate and do tricks.

"This weekend didn't work out too well," he said. "Pretty much all we did was run from the cops. Most of the places you get kicked out or if the cops are in a bad mood you get a ticket."

Commissioner Jim Cawley, who grew up a quarter-mile from the proposed First Tee site, said he understands the parents' and children's situation and told township council members back in July that the county would donate land for the township to construct a skate park. He even gave them three options for sites.

"We would be happy to work with the township appropriately to meet the need," he said.

But a free site doesn't alleviate the financial hurdle, said Bristol Township Council President Tina Davis. The township encouraged the parents group, led by Mark Heyduk, to research how much a skate park would cost and drum up donations and grants.

Earlier this month the county allocated \$17,000 for engineering to support a land alteration permit application. Township zoning officer Glenn Kucher said the county won't get the permit until the council approves a land development plan, which the county has not submitted.

In the meantime, county Parks Director Bill Mitchell will give a presentation to the council at its Jan. 24 meeting; Cawley and Marseglia said they plan to be there.

With the money allocated for First Tee, Marseglia said, the county could build a skate park and basketball courts and bail out the underfunded Red Cross homeless shelter in Levittown. Middletown, where she was a supervisor, built a skate park for under \$150,000

several years ago, she said. Skate parks routinely allow nonresidents to participate at a higher rate than residents.

"First Tee, while it may be a nice idea," she said, "I don't think it's worth the money."

To pay for the First Tee project the county has set aside \$400,000 in tipping fees, which is money Waste Management gives the county per ton of trash buried in the Tullytown and Falls sanitary landfills. Mitchell said Waste Management has committed in-kind services worth another \$400,000.

But the in-kind services request has to pass company muster, said Waste Management spokeswoman Geri Rush. "As far as we're concerned, that First Tee project is still under review," she said.

Asked whether there is support for youth golf in Lower Bucks, Mitchell cited figures for the nearby county-owned Oxford Valley Golf Course in Falls. Last year, the club brought in \$271,000 for 32,000 rounds of golf. The county could not add the First Tee project to the golf course because it was built on swamp land and has space limitations, he said.

Mitchell said people could use the driving range on their lunch breaks to relieve stress, and the facility would improve "quality of life" throughout the region.

Cawley said the county has proven its commitment to the township by locating or planning to locate a government services center, library, fire training center and nature center there.

Plus, Martin said, the county is responsible for providing recreation to the region, not just one community.

"If that community wants a skate park," he said, "they should build a skate park. I don't think we should be in the business of building 54 skate parks to 54 municipalities."

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• Caption: photo: Jesse Giberson, 16 (center), performs tricks in a parking lot in Levittown with friends Herman McCracken, 16 (left), and Ryan Mohn, 16. Bikers and skaters in Lower Bucks are out of luck. County commissioners have passed on a skate park in the area in favor of a three-hole golf course and driving range. STEVE GENGLER

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